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SUBJECT: GROWING INFLUENCE OF TRADITIONAL ISLAM IN TAJIKISTAN - WHAT WE SHOULD BE DOING

REF: 08 DUSHANBE 1409

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: On December 11 and 12, EmbOffs accompanied William Trigg, USAID's Regional Society and State Advisor based in Bishkek, to meetings with Muslim clerics, government officials, and researchers in Dushanbe. During Trigg's visit, interlocutors said the Government of Tajikistan had little credibility in religious circles, but would not rethink its failing policy. Traditional Islamic leaders with no government connections - and who even openly oppose the government - are growing in influence. The United States should engage them in a discussion of the image of the United States and its commitment to defending religious freedom. End summary.

#### GOVERNMENT POLICY ACCOMPLISHES OPPOSITE OF INTENDED EFFECT

[1](#)2. (SBU) Abdullo Rahnamo, a researcher at the Center for Strategic Research, said the Government's religious policy over the last ten years was a failed ideological experiment. The Government wanted to co-opt religion to legitimize and augment its authority; government officials have sought to both control and restrict religious communities, and to court religious figures as allies of the government. This contradictory path had accomplished the opposite of what the Government intended.

[1](#)3. (SBU) According to Rahnamo, each restriction on religious expression has hurt the image of the Government. The government sought to control Tajikistan's clerics by creating the "independent" Council of Ulamo and weakening the country's muftiate. However, individual imams became far more influential than those on the Council of Ulamo (reftel). The Government sought to control religious instruction by taking over the Islamic Institute and placing it under the Ministry of Education. However, imams trained abroad had much more authority in religious communities than the "secular imams" trained at the Institute. The Government sought to control the country's youth through dress codes. Banning the hijab, however, energized young people, and wearing the hijab became a symbol of individual expression.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Traditional Islamic leaders - as opposed to those who the Government posits as religious leaders - had a large and increasing constituency. Rahnamo said Islam was "in the hands of these traditional leaders," not government officials. For example, while the Government cited the need to prevent the growth of "foreign" religious influence, it would be Tajikistan's traditional religious leaders who would prevent the growth of the Salafis.

[1](#)5. (SBU) Nevertheless, President Rahmon's government remained committed to its highly flawed policy. Officials in the newly established Islamic Studies Center, the Ministry of Culture's Department of Religious Affairs, and law enforcement agencies lacked the specialized knowledge to effectively engage religious communities. They were detached from the communities they theoretically served; how could Murodali Davlatov, the head of President Rahmon's newly created Islamic Studies Center, formulate policy when he was "against Tajikistan's clergy?"

¶6. (SBU) Idibek Ziyoev, a senior official in the Department of Religious Affairs, largely confirmed Rahnamo's criticisms of government officials. After saying his agency had "no complications" with the religious community, he spent fifteen minutes explaining the problems posed by the Salafis and made several factual mistakes about Islam. He did not know the number of students who went abroad for religious studies and was unable to explain how his agency collected information about religious communities. He said the Government had a "different way" of approaching religious issues than Iran, Pakistan, and Arab countries, but could not be more specific. He said the hijab issue had been blown out of proportion; women and girls were wearing hijabs mainly as a fashion statement, not out of religious belief.

#### NEGATIVE IMAGES OF SECULAR GOVERNMENTS

¶7. (SBU) Badriddin Karimov, the imam-khatib of the Pakhtakor mosque, complained "the Government does not allow us to express independent ideas in our sermons; if you go beyond the instructions of the government, you will have problems." He resented the Government's restrictions on religious expression, a sentiment shared by many imams.

¶8. (U) On November 28, the State Committee for National Security summoned Eshoni Nuriddin, the imam-khatib of the Muhammadi Mosque in Vahdat and one of Tajikistan's most respected and popular religious figures (reftel) for questioning in Dushanbe. Local media reported extensively on the incident. Nuriddin told Asia-Plus the authorities "accused me of criticizing the government policy...I said that is not so. I just try to put people to the straight and narrow..." He accused Murodali Davlatov, President Rahmon's advisor

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on Islamic issues, of collaborating with the State Committee on National Security.

¶9. (SBU) Traditional Islamic leaders' views on the United States are of particular importance because of their growing influence in Tajikistan. In a meeting with Mullo Abdurahim, the imam-khatib of the Qazogon Friday prayer mosque in Dushanbe, who is one of the most popular of Tajikistan's traditional Islamic leaders (reftel), he appeared to have a negative - though not hostile - impression of the United States, formed by the war in Iraq and U.S. assistance to Israel. Other traditional Islamic leaders have brought up the same issues, including the rumor that the United States brought Salafism to Tajikistan. In contrast, Badriddin Karimov had a more positive impression of the United States, which was likely a result of his participation in a USAID Community Connections program.

#### WHAT WE SHOULD BE DOING

¶10. (SBU) Comment: The Government's adherence to a highly flawed policy appears to be increasing the alienation of religious communities and strengthening the influence of traditional Islamic leaders. The most recent draft of a Law on Religion is now circulating through Parliament, and we anticipate its passage within the next month. This new draft, which contains numerous provisions that are objectionable to religious communities and civil society, typifies the lack of foresight in the government's approach. While there is little that we can do to engage Tajik officials in a discussion of this issue, we can step up our efforts to engage traditional Islamic leaders. Mullo Abdurahim said interaction with American Muslims in Tajikistan and the United States would be interesting and useful.

¶11. (SBU) Comment continued: In addition to continuing to meet with imams around the country, Embassy staff, including from USAID and PAS will:  
-Identify important traditional Islamic leaders and share the information with other sections and U.S. Government agencies at Post;  
-Obtain copies of sermons of these leaders on DVD and analyze their messages;

- Distribute the International Religious Freedom report directly to these leaders and discuss the U.S. commitment to religious freedom;
- Send these leaders to the United States on Community Connections or International Visitor programs;
- Bring American Muslims to Tajikistan to discuss Islam in America with these leaders.

¶12. Comment continued: Our small public diplomacy budget, a holdover from the days when the Embassy was located in Kazakhstan, and our overstretched public diplomacy staff, the smallest in the South and Central Asia Bureau, limit our ability to engage effectively with this mostly-Muslim population. Post has requested additional resources and believes that additional exchange and educational programs would make a big impact in our understanding of and influence on an increasingly religious population. End comment.

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